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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS HERALD 3: SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA HIGHLIGHTS
COUNTRY'S BACKWARD DEMOCRATIC MARCH

REF: ADDIS ABABA 261

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. From January 28 to February 1, Poloff and senior political FSN visited several areas in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) and the southern portion of the Oromiya region, to meet with opposition leaders, government administrators and NGOs in order to evaluate preparations for the April 13 and 20 elections that will be largely viewed as a litmus test for progress in Ethiopian democracy following the post-2005 election conflict. Emboffs found that formerly heavily-challenged districts in SNNPR will likely see very little competition. Opposition party leaders in both regions were highly pessimistic about their chances, saying that the ruling Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was interfering in both voter and candidate registration, making it nearly impossible for them to field candidates. They did not anticipate being able to compete in the majority of contests. Alleged techniques used by the EPRDF ranged from "bribing" voters to register as EPRDF party members to threats on the life of registered opposition candidates, and generally were much for severe in Oromiya than SNNPR. While Post has no concrete evidence of such harassment, reports are persistent in many areas of Ethiopia. SNNPR and southern Oromiya, both heavily represented in the federal parliament by opposition parties, will undoubtedly remain governed by the EPRDF following what will be a mostly pro-forma local election process. END SUMMARY

SNNPR: OPPOSITION EXPRESSES SOME HOPE, BUT LITTLE CONFIDENCE

¶2. (SBU) Meetings with government officials, opposition leaders and NGOs in SNNPR revealed severe complications and a poor competitive environment in the run-up to the April local elections. The zones (districts) visited--Hadiya and Kembatta Tembaro, as well as the regional capital of Awassa--are areas that have had a significant opposition presence for several years and, following the 2005 federal elections, are majority (80 percent) represented in the federal parliament by the opposition United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) party. However, the ruling EPRDF maintains control over all the thousands of zonal, woreda (county) and kebele (community) governmental council seats up

for election in April.

¶3. (SBU) With the strong showing by the opposition in 2005, it would be expected that the areas visited would be hotly contested in the local elections. However, opposition leaders report that since the 2005 national elections, and particularly in recent months, the EPRDF has made a strong push to lure voters through a combination of traditional political campaigning and intimidation of opposition voters and potential candidates. In fact, during the visit opposition leaders expressed their longing for the political openness that prevailed before the 2005 elections, likening the current environment to the (largely undemocratic) 2000 elections. Typical complaints from the opposition included:

- Most, if not all, local National Election Board (NEB) employees are EPRDF nominees;
- Continued restrictions on opposition gatherings, dating back to the post-2005 clamp down;
- Extended closure of several party offices (though the majority of offices were open at the time of the visit);
- EPRDF cadre intimidation of farmers, threatening to withhold fertilizer, Productive Safety Net and Protecting Basic Services support if they do not register to vote and pledge support for the EPRDF;
- EPRDF cadres threatening to fire civil servants, including teachers, if they choose to run as opposition candidates;
- NEB local officials restricting known opposition supporters from registering to vote;
- EPRDF cadres gathering voters and "bribing" them to simultaneously register to vote and as EPRDF members; and
- Threats of violence from local EPRDF cadres against potential opposition candidates.

Opposition leaders in each of the areas visited reported that, due to the above interference in the democratic process

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on the part of the EPRDF, they have been unable to field candidates for most seats in their areas, despite their perceived strong support from voters. Most said that they would be able to put forth candidates for some zonal and woreda seats, while foregoing kebele elections altogether. They pointed out that, absent the current levels of harassment, they would be able to field more candidates, particularly given the support they have in the region, but it is unclear whether they would have the capacity to field candidates for every open position.

¶4. (SBU) Zonal and regional officials (all EPRDF) contradicted all the opposition's criticisms, saying that the voters will turn out in April to vote for EPRDF candidates not because of alleged intimidation, but rather as a result of the strong push they have made to appeal to voters following the 2005 elections. Almost unanimously, EPRDF officials admitted that their party has made "mistakes" and had been "arrogant" before the 2005 elections, leading to the strong showing by the opposition, but that since that time they have corrected their course. They denied all reports by the opposition of harassment of either voters or potential candidates. Improvement in standards of living, stemming from improved roads, better education and more jobs are certain to lead the EPRDF to victory in the April elections, they said, not the harassment alleged by the opposition. Moreover, zonal and regional administrators report that following outreach by the EPRDF, the region's politically savvy voters had "come back to their senses," changing alliances to the EPRDF. They reported that the EPRDF has been able to field candidates for all zonal, woreda and kebele seats up for election.

¶5. (SBU) NEB officials similarly denied opposition charges, saying that NEB employees are unaffiliated with any political party. They reported that voter registration has been successful thus far, with over 90 percent of eligible voters registered, and no reports of interference or intimidation in

the registration process. On the contrary, regional directors from NGOs, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) and Action Professionals for the People (APAP), both involved in voter education and election observation in 2005, reported numerous problems leading up to the April elections.

They supported many of the opposition claims of voter and candidate intimidation, opining that, come election day, many voters will cast ballots not because they want to, but because they are forced to. Both organizations lamented the lack of open competition, saying that most voters have "given up on democracy" following the post-2005 GoE crackdown and subsequent lack of political openness. EHRCO and APAP officials reported that they would like to continue their role in voter education and election observation, but question whether they will be granted the freedom to do so and how much voter interest there will be in the April elections. (NOTE: While NGOs may have the capacity and desire to conduct both voter education and election observation, the new Electoral Law passed in June 2007 permits organizations to conduct either one or the other, but not both, of these functions. END NOTE.)

OROMIYA: HEAVY HAND OF GOE KEEPS OPPOSITION DOWN

¶6. (SBU) In contrast with SNNPR, neighboring southern Oromiya has a much more limited record of opposition participation, freedom and success in recent elections. Though many districts were won by the opposition Oromo Peoples Congress (OPC) and Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) in the 2005 federal elections, several election winners have since quit or left the country due to severe harassment.

¶7. (SBU) The severity of reports of intimidation and persecution from opposition leaders in southern Oromiya was much more dramatic than those in SNNPR. Though separated by only a few miles, the nature of the alleged harassment by government cadres was dramatically more brutal. In addition to reports of bribing of, and threats to, voters, both major opposition parties reported violent intimidation of possible candidates, leading them to keep candidates lists secret until the last possible day to register, providing them

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limited immunity to arrest. Such reports include:

- Arrests by local police of party organizers and potential candidates without charges or opportunity for bail;
- Threats on the life of registered candidates by GoE security forces;
- Continued closure of opposition party offices;
- Outright refusal of NEB officials to register opposition supporters; and
- Intimidation by EPRDF cadres of friends and family of known opposition organizers or registered candidates.

In meetings with Poloff and senior FSN, nearly all Oromo opposition leaders were visibly nervous to be seen with foreigners. During one meeting, individuals who appeared to be plain clothes security were seen taking pictures of the meeting from a distance. At least one party office in which a meeting took place has since been closed down by local GoE officials.

¶8. (SBU) Similar to SNNPR government officials, however, officials in southern Oromiya outright denied claims by the opposition of intimidation or of illegal influence over the voter registration process. They claim to have reached out to opposition parties in an attempt to ensure that they participate in the elections, but report that disorganization and lack of support may very well lead to an opposition withdrawal from the elections. They report that former supporters of opposition parties are unsatisfied with the accomplishments of their elected officials, leading to a large-scale return of voters to the EPRDF.

¶9. (SBU) The Embassy team was unable to visit NEB offices in Oromiya, as had been scheduled. The NEB visits *- the first by any diplomatic mission during this election season -- had been scheduled through the national office of the NEB. However, at the same time the team was visiting southern Oromiya, a team from the British Embassy was inquiring with the national NEB office about visiting local offices in western Oromiya. NEB leaders apparently became uneasy with the idea of numerous diplomatic missions visiting NEB offices throughout the country and canceled the team's scheduled meetings, saying that in the future, all diplomatic mission must formally request in writing to visit offices, submitting letters to the Foreign Ministry, which will then pass the request on to the NEB.

COMMENT: DEMOCRATIC PROCESS IN REVERSE

¶10. (SBU) Following the 2005 elections and subsequent unrest, domestic politics have remained tense, with little space allowed for opposition parties. The local elections, originally planned for 2006 but repeatedly delayed, have been informally billed as the next test in Ethiopia's march towards multi-party democracy. However, in what would otherwise be expected as a hotly contested and widely debated election season, it now appears that most of the thousands of open seats in zonal, woreda (country) and kebele (community), and city councils will be uncontested, remaining with the ruling EPRDF. Opposition party leaders and NGOs allege that, following losses in the 2005 federal elections, the EPRDF embarked on a heavy-handed campaign to ensure that the same would not happen in the local elections. Widespread reports of voter intimidation and severe harassment of potential opposition candidates, together with a biased NEB and media, ensure that few local-level government seats will change hands. NGOs involved with voter education and election monitoring in 2005 believe that a repeat of the violence seen after the last election is unlikely however, due to the fact that voter apathy is rampant. While government officials are confident about their prospects in the elections, believing that they will be reelected, opposition parties and NGOs report feeling that long-gone are the days of political openness that prevailed prior to the 2005 elections and that the country has returned to the restricted political environment of 1995 and 2000.

¶11. (SBU) Though the alleged harassment and intimidation by EPRDF cadres has apparently restricted the opposition's

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ability to field large numbers of candidates, it is unclear whether even in the absence of such limitations they would have the capacity to compete for all open positions. The fact that the opposition does not operate as one cohesive group has made it easier for the well-organized EPRDF to dominate the pre-election preparation period. It is clear that the donor community needs to work closely with the GoE to open political space. Otherwise, the more important 2010 national elections could turn more violent than post-2005 election period, due to voter frustration and opposition to the ruling EPRDF. END COMMENT.
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